

The Best Offense Is a Good Defense

Preventing head injuries during fall sports

By: Dr. Christopher Demers, MD



Now that the smoke has cleared and fall sports are officially underway, crowds are filing into area sports venues to watch kids, teens and young adults take to the field in search of gridiron glory. In addition, indoor sports such as basketball, volleyball and hockey are also underway, pitting young athletes against each other on the way to state finals. But with all of this athletic action, comes

the risk for injury – head injury to be specific – something that a little bed rest can't always take care of. Whether it's a mild concussion or something as severe as extended coma, once an athlete has sustained a head injury, he or she becomes more likely to sustain future head injuries, something I'm sure we would all like to protect our children from.

According to ChildrensHospital.org, "the leading cause of death from a sports-related injury is a brain injury. Approximately 2 out of 5 traumatic brain injuries among children are associated with participation in sports and recreational activities." According to an American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) study utilizing Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) data, "there were an estimated 446,788 sports-related head injuries treated at U.S. hospital emergency rooms in 2009." Keep in mind that those nearly half-million hospital visits

exclude trips to the family physician, urgent care, university health center and the like, and you're beginning to see an accurate picture of just how many head injuries are sustained by young athletes across the United States each year.

Add to that the fact that two of the top four sports resulting in head injury are football (with 46,948 annually) and basketball (34,692), while cheerleading continues to climb the charts at a rapid pace, and our children are at serious risk for debilitating and sometimes fatal injury.

But, as we all know, the best defense is a good offense. And with these simple steps, athletes can help avoid the risk of many of these dangerous injuries.

1. Wear a properly fitted, certified helmet.

While helmets or other headwear are not available for all sports such as volleyball, basketball and soccer, those sports that utilize protective headwear should make sure that all helmets are properly fitted and certified. Football, hockey, lacrosse, baseball and softball helmets for example, receive certification from the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE) based on the amount of usage the helmet undergoes as well as the intensity of use. Helmets must be recertified periodically and should not undergo any type of



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alterations, including those to the facemask.

2. Have a baseline.

Athletes, particularly those in high-risk, high-contact sports, should undergo neurological testing at the beginning of the season so that, in case of head injury, there are baseline results with which to compare.

3. Rest

While types and severity of head injury can vary greatly, all head injury recuperation takes time. For example, there are three grades of concussion. Those suffering Stage I concussions have not lost consciousness and symptoms, such as dizziness, last less than 15 minutes. There is no loss of consciousness in Stage II concussions either, however, symptoms last more than 15 minutes. Players suffering Stage I and II injuries can return to the field if, at the end of one week, no symptoms (memory loss, headache, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, confusion, disorientation, irritability, lack of concentration) are displayed. Stage III concussions involve loss of consciousness for any amount of time. Those who sustain stage III head injuries may return to play after one month, only if no symptoms are displayed for at least one full week leading up to the player's return.

It is critical that athletes wait the allotted amount of time before returning to play as symptoms are not always immediately present. Also important to note: the terms mild brain injury, mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI), mild head injury (MHI), minor head trauma, and concussion are often used interchangeably so if you hear any of these words from a coach, trainer, doctor or other professional, pay close attention.

4. Training

Being in adequate physical condition is a critical component to avoiding injury when playing sports – no matter what the sport is. By staying

in shape and following a regular training schedule, athletes are better prepared to avoid falls or quickly maneuver out of harm's way.

5. Play by the Rules

Believe it or not, the rules are there to protect athletes and oftentimes, to prevent injury. Illegal blocks and tackles, fouls, and other banned action are there to keep the game and its players safe. Encourage your children to follow the rules and report inappropriate behavior by others to a coach or other official.

Playing sports and participating in other recreational activities, especially with the array of options we have here in the Sierra Nevada, is a great thing. But it's even better when done safely. While my profession is also my passion, I often am presented with the unfortunate opportunity to meet young people who have sustained traumatic head injury due to sports. And because of my expertise in the field, I am also presented with opportunities such as these, to help educate the community about the importance of safety when recreating. I wish you all a happy, healthy fall and winter sports season. ■

About the author: Dr. Demers holds a medical degree from Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago and completed his residency at Brown University Alpert Medical School in Rhode Island. His specialties include fusions, laminectomies and vertebroplasty, as well as discetomy. In addition to expertise in the use of stereotactic radiosurgery to treat brain tumors, Dr. Demers is skilled in the treatment of various brain conditions including chiari malformation, glioma surgery, hematomy, and trigeminal neuralgia.



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